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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study analyzed the portrayal of females as protagonists in adolescent literature published 1989-1993. A review of literature showed that 85 percent of main characters in stories for young children were male and that sexism still existed in books for young people. For this study the literature survey instrument used in the initial 25 texts is presented, as well as discussion on qualitative sampling. Sixty volunteer graduate student/teachers collected data; 5 were male and 55 female. Some reported difficulty in making judgments on the personality characteristics of the female protagonists. The findings conclude 35-50% of the literature involved female protagonists and both male and female support characters typified the common stereotypes. Female protagonists, though not infrequently appearing in literature, were rarely portrayed beyond their stereotypic, traditional roles. (EH)

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EXPLORING FEMALE REPRESENTATION IN CURRENT ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

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Exploring Female Representation in Current Adolescent Literature

The objective of this descriptive study was to examine current literary trends in the behavioral representations of female protagonists in adolescent literature. Three primary questions guided this inquiry: (1) To what extent are females portrayed as protagonists in recently published adolescent literature? (2) How are female protagonists portrayed in adolescent literature published since 1989? (3) What patterns will emerge as protagonist behaviors are identified and categorized?

Literature Review

Literature plays a dual role both as the cornerstone of the school curriculum and as a representation of a society's values. Although we may recognize that gender issues are intimately tied to culture and experiences outside the classroom, we often fail to face this complex issue in the classroom. Passive behavior in females predominates in most literature for young people (Lehnert, 1992; Noddings, 1992; Stover, 1992; D'Angelo, 1989). This is coupled with an overwhelming imbalance in the gender of main character -- 85% of main characters in stories for young children are male (Fox, 1993). Cooper (1989) concludes a discussion of Caldecott and Newbery winners by stating that, as of 1989, sexism still exists in books for young people. She found that there are more female characters in recent books, but the roles and characterization of both male and female characters have seen little change.

Gilligan (1982) studied the differences in the moral development of young males and females and concluded that society has overlooked the importance of differences in female development. Failure to see the different realities of women's lives and to hear the differences in their voices may stem in part from the assumption that there is a single mode of social experience and interpretation. Later, Brown & Gilligan (1992) found that adolescence precipitates a developmental crisis in girls' lives.

In a culture that is unaware of girls' patterns of development and uninterested in girls' experiences, females may be objectified and idealized, trivialized and denigrated. This sets in motion a degenerating spiral of female capability that is manifested in that culture's literature, which, in turn, can add to that downward spiral.

Some anthropologists support this view. They claim that gender is not biology, but rather a cultural construction (Ortner & Whitehead, 1981). Literature reflects that culture's structure. People learn to behave in gender appropriate ways in all the activities and practices of their daily lives (West & Zimmerman, 1987). According to social learning theory, stereotyped views of sex roles are incorporated into an adolescent child's repertoire of behaviors. Thus, they selectively imitate what they perceive as culturally designated appropriate sex role behavior (Hartley, 1959: Weitzman, 1972). Moreover, other researchers have found that children exposed to

material containing non-traditional roles have been influenced by these stories (Berg-Cross & Berg-Cross, 1978; Kropp & Halverson, 1983; Litcher & Johnson, 1969; Styer, 1975). Anderson and Many (1993) found that when students were presented with non-traditional behavior in a story, while perhaps not choosing to display the same behavior, they became more tolerant of the non-traditional behavior. Becoming tolerant of "other" behavior becomes possible when students are given the opportunity to view the behavior without cultural bias.

While researchers have examined some aspects of gender issues, little is known about the prototypes of behavior that current adolescent literature presents. Female adolescents appear to become disenfranchised at the same point in life when they tend to read "girls" literature, but the effects of specific literary models and behavioral prototypes in adolescent girls' lives remains unclear. The focus of this paper is to systematically investigate the behavior prototypes of female protagonists in adolescent literature published since 1989.

Methods

The literature survey instrument (Appendix A) was developed from interpretations of data gathered in a two-step process involving grounded theory research method (Glaser, 1978; Hutchinson, 1986) and multiple-case study design (Yin, 1989). The grounded theory approach required a holistic scanning of 25 selections of adolescent literature to answer how females were represented. Researchers then collaborated on the

interpretations of female protagonist behavior patterns which emerged from the reading of the initial 25 texts. During further instrument development, qualitative sampling of adolescent literature was continued until no further categories of female protagonists' types and behaviors emerged. A standard survey instrument was developed in order to facilitate uniform evaluation of a larger quantity of adolescent literature by an extended research group consisting of practicing teachers enrolled in graduate literature studies. A standard scale from one to four was provided for the respondents to indicate which of a pair of antonymic characteristics was most indicative of their overall impression of the protagonist. A larger space was later provided for open-ended remarks cn the survey instrument because of an outcry from respondents that the characteristics were too dynamic to be portrayed with a single response unless some means could be provided for them to explain their rationale in each instance of a conflicting choice.

The design and application of the literature survey was accomplished in accordance with procedures outlined by Jaeger, (1988). Construct validity was addressed during survey instrument development and was subsequently tested through collaborative discussions among researchers, graduate student readers, and university peers. All researchers reviewing the survey during developmental phases were volunteers. All responses to the literature survey were systematically recorded and later, statistical analyses were performed with quantitative

compilations of informed interpretations of adolescent literature through application of the survey instrument.

Data Source

Books used within this study included a sample of children's and young adult novels published in 1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, and 1993 identified by catalog to have a female protagonist. Other data consisted of researchers' qualitative notes of selected novels used for developing the survey instrument; quantitative data gained from application of survey instrument on a wide variety of adolescent literature identified from The Children's Catalog (1990, 1991, 1992) and The Junior High Catalog (1990, 1991, 1992); and graduate students' classifications of female protagonist's characterization.

Quantitative Methods

Data from the survey were compiled and subjected to standard statistical procedures to determine frequency counts, ranges, means, variance, and standard deviation. Common factor analyses with varimax rotation were performed on variables having greatest variance, but no statistical clustering or factoring techniques were possible for the entire battery of variables due to the small sample size (n=84).

Results

Approximately 35 percent of the total children's literature and 50 percent of the junior high level literature considered in this study involved female protagonists. A small portion of the female protagonists were portrayed as assertive within historical

novels, contemporaneous novels, and in modern fiction. Few strong female protagonists were presented. The preponderance of both male and female support characters were typical of common stereotypes.

Eighty four survey observations representing a total of sixty four adolescent literature selections were completed by the graduate students for statistical analysis of thirty three identified protagonist characterizations. Sixty graduate student/teachers contributed to the data collection. Five were male and fifty five were female.

Nine protagonist characteristics accounted for most of the variance and had standard deviations of greater than one scale point. Each of these pairs are listed in Table 1, along with the scale score mean and the degree to which opinions within one standard deviation might affect each response. Common themes

Table 1: Protagonist Characteristics Having Greatest Variance

Characteristic (1--4)	Mean	Std.Dev.	Range
Heroine/Victim	2.2	± 1.3	0.9--3.5
Passive/Active	2.7	± 1.1	1.6--3.8
Agreeable/Assertive	2.4	± 1.0	1.4--3.4
Noncompetitive/Competitive	2.5	± 1.0	1.5--3.5
Self-conscious/Confident	2.4	± 1.0	1.4--3.4
Independent/Dependent	2.2	± 1.0	1.2--3.2
Inner directed/Focus on what others think	2.4	± 1.0	1.4--3.4

within the literature typically dealt with an inner struggle as the female protagonist matured during the story, or as she attempted to cope with some external force or issue. [Reviewers noted difficulty in classifying the protagonist in regard to these characteristics because of an internal change in the

protagonist during the story.] Over half of all the comments made by reviewers about protagonists' character shifts and inner conflicts occurred within those seven pairs of traits listed in Table 1.

Virtually all the protagonists in all of the stories possessed certain characteristics. Table 2 summarizes which traits among the eight pairs having least variance were most commonly shared. Nearly all protagonists were seen as good, sensitive of others, unselfish, innocent, competent, emotionally expressive, rational, and adequate to their tasks overall.

Table 2: Protagonist Characteristics Having Leas ·ance

Characteristic (1--4)	Mean	Std.Dev.	nge
Good/Bad	1.2	± 0.4	0.8--1.6
Sensitive/Insensitive	1.2	± 0.4	0.8--1.6
Selfish/***Unselfish***	3.4	± 0.6	2.8--4.0
Sexual/***Innocent***	3.5	± 0.6	2.9--4.1
Competent/Incompetent	1.5	± 0.7	0.8--2.2
Unemotional/***Emotional***	3.4	± 0.7	2.7--4.1
Rational/Irrational	1.7	± 0.8	0.9--2.5
Adequate/Inadequate	1.7	± 0.8	0.9--2.5

Common factor analysis of the characteristics in Table 1 yielded three primary factors which could account for thirty six percent of the total variance. Consideration of three additional factors accounted for a total of sixty percent of the variance. Traits having factor loadings of .4 or larger were considered to be primary identifiers and loadings of .2 to .4 were considered as ancillary traits. Table 3 contains a summary of the factor loadings of the six factors.

Factor 1 protagonists were primarily self-directed heroines

who were active rather than passive, but also noncompetitive. Many of their actions dealt with struggles from within. Factor 2

Table 3: Rotated Factor Pattern

	Factor Loadings					
Trait Pair (-/+)	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4	Factor 5	Factor 6
Heroine/Victim	**-0.656	-0.135	-0.090	* 0.336	* -0.241	0.156
Inner directed/ Focused on what others think	**-0.604	* -0.218	* -0.237	0.083	-0.047	* -0.225
Competitive/ Noncompetitive	* 0.232	** 0.675	-0.011	-0.081	* 0.298	* 0.217
Agreeable/ Assertive	0.149	** 0.672	* 0.369	* -0.337	-0.123	0.093
Self-conscious/ Confident	0.178	0.111	** 0.778	-0.134	0.171	0.096
Independent/ Dependent	-0.188	-0.164	-0.133	** 0.637	-0.140	0.005
Passive/Active	* 0.281	0.168	** 0.428	* -0.309	** 0.660	0.058
Traditional/ Nontraditional	0.021	0.084	0.048	0.006	0.016	** 0.453
TOTAL VARIANCE	1.017	1.048	1.009	0.760	0.649	0.348
PERCENT OF TOTAL	12.718	13.100	12.618	9.500	8.109	4.347

** denotes primary characteristic loading
* denotes ancillary loading

protagonists were noncompetitive, but assertive and also somewhat self-directed. Factor 3 protagonists were extremely active and confident. They were also assertive and self-directed. Factor 4 protagonists were dependent on others, agreeable to suggestions made by others, and they were typically passive individuals. They were typically the victims of injustice or cruelty. Factor 5 protagonists were very active/action oriented heroines, but were also noncompetitive. Factor 6 protagonists were nontraditional, but self-directed and still noncompetitive. None of the protagonist types identified by factor analysis were competitive. All were considered inner-directed and reflective by the reviewers.

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Reader Reactions

Much of the behavior of the protagonist may be perceived through the eyes of the reviewer and gender differences may account for differential interpretations. The following quotes come from three readers of different books having a protagonist who experiences a similar change of character within the story:

> [Character change] She learned to like herself as herself. She gained some self confidence. [Reaction to book] Nothing, I thought the book was kind of stupid. [Reaction to protagonist] Yuk, too much self doubt - a wiener. [male reviewer]
>
> At the beginning of the book, Sophie allowed the bully to make fun of her, even though it hurt her feelings. At the end Sophie finally stood up to Charlotte and told her how she felt. It took me back to my elementary years and how sensitive I used to be in grade school. It felt good to reminisce. I started to empathize with the protagonist. [female reviewer]
>
> In the beginning of the book, Anna is shy, self-conscious, unsure of herself, afraid to express her opinions. By the end, although still outwardly quiet and reflective, she is confident, assertive and taking action to correct perceived wrongs. I enjoyed this book. Anna's first days in high school brought back memories of the fears and worry surrounding my own beginning in high school. My personal response to Anna is admiration. [female reviewer]

Approximately sixty two such reader reactions were obtained from the teacher/graduate student reviewers.

Table 4: Reader Reactions and Impressions of Female Protagonists

Generally Positive	32	Generally Negative	19	Neutral	11
Admiration/Respect	13	Sympathy/Pity	15		
Liked	4	Disliked	4		
Personalized	8				
Expanded awareness	7				

Discussion

Female protagonists are not infrequently encountered in adolescent literature. It is rare, however, for the female protagonists to be portrayed beyond their stereotypic, traditional roles. Female adolescents are portrayed as typical female adolescents for female adolescents to read about. Perhaps such reflective discussion within the book helps to develop secondary characters and is required by the genre. Comparisons of protagonist treatment relative to gender of author might prove insightful.

Adolescents (or readers strongly oriented by their own gender responses) may need education to view the protagonists in a balanced manner. Readers who mature as males may have different experiences or orientations and, therefore, react differently than females to the experiences of female protagonists. Several of the graduate student reviewers described their reactions through the lenses of their own experiences.

Likewise, level of education and awareness of the reviewer may bias judgements. If such clear differences can be seen with graduate students and teachers, it would likely be seen more intensely among adolescents after socialization and would be problematic prior to and during socialization into a gender role. More research needs to be completed using early readers and middle level readers.

Literature has the potential to influence behavior if

students are systematically exposed. By strengthening our understanding of the portrayal of females in current adolescent literature, we increase our ability to understand the potential influences of the roles presented in that literature. If flexible attitudes about gender are desirable, educators need to be aware of how adolescent literature represents female behavior and of the potential effect of that literature on the role socialization of adolescents.

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APPENDIX A: SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Survey of Gender in Recent Literature

Genre:_____ Reviewer:_____ Date:_____
Title:_____
Author:_____ Female Protagonist:_____

Directions: The following is a list of word pairs which could be used to describe the female protagonist in the book you are reading. Please circle one number that is closest to the identifier word of each pair which best describes the character listed above. Write any comments or explanations within the box underneath each scale. Do not mark any pairs which you do not understand or which do not apply. Please describe in the spaces provided with each pair of traits any conflicts or changes in the protagonist's behavior.

Scale: Character is: 1-most like left descriptor, 2-a little like left descriptor, 3-a little like right descriptor, 4-most like right descriptor.

Tactful ----------1----2----3----4-----	Blunt
Gentle ----------1----2----3----4-----	Rough
Unaware of others' feelings ----------1----2----3----4-----	Aware of others' feelings
Unemotional ----------1----2----3----4-----	Expressive emotions
Independent ----------1----2----3----4-----	Dependent
Non-competitive ------1----2----3----4-----	Competitive
Logical ----------1----2----3----4-----	Subjective
Self-conscious -------1----2----3----4-----	Confident
Straightforward ------1----2----3----4-----	Manipulative
Interrupts others ----1----2----3----4-----	Interrupted by others
Laughs & listens -----1----2----3----4-----	Tells jokes
Speaks directly to the point ----------1----2----3----4-----	Takes roundabout approach
Reflective/Tentative--1----2----3----4-----	Action oriented

Competent ----------1----2----3----4--	Incompetent/Unconcerned about being competent
Popular ----------1----2----3----4--	Unpopular/Not concerned with own popularity
Agreeable ----------1----2----3----4--	Assertive or stubborn
Sexual ----------1----2----3----4--	Innocent, pure
Inner direction ------1----2----3----4--	Focus on what others think
Powerful ----------1----2----3----4--	Powerless
Public ----------1----2----3----4--	Private
Adequate ----------1----2----3----4--	Inadequate
Petty ----------1----2----3----4--	Magnanimous
Hero/Heroine ---------1----2----3----4--	Victim
Selfish ----------1----2----3----4--	Altruistic, generous
Rich ----------1----2----3----4--	Poor
Good ----------1----2----3----4--	Bad, mean
Looks right ----------1----2----3----4--	Doesn't fit in
Traditional ----------1----2----3----4--	Non-traditional
Rational ----------1----2----3----4--	Irrational
Adversarial ----------1----2----3----4--	Collegial
Attention-seeking ----1----2----3----4--	Embarrassed by attention
Caring ----------1----2----3----4--	Insensitive
Reflective ----------1----2----3----4--	Spontaneous

Please describe how the female protagonist changed from the beginning of the book to the end:

How did reading this book affect you personally?

What is your primary personal response to the female protagonist?